Initiating Debate

Affirmative action and admissions in higher education

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This set of articles is offered in an attempt to share with a wider reading public the kinds of issues that arose in the course of a review at the University of Cape Town (UCT) that was undertaken into its admissions policies. They encapsulate the major elements on the debate within the review and are presented here in an attempt to open up the discussion of how the higher education community in South Africa might seek to take forward the challenges that relate to the development of equitable admissions policies for the country.

The process at UCT is important to contextualise. It begins with a debate in 2007 that takes place around the 'justness' and the appropriateness of using 'race' as a factor in determining appointments in the university and in its student admission policies. The debate begins in the University, but is quickly taken into the public domain where several commentators take issue with each other in newspapers and websites. At the University itself it leads to the adoption of a specific admissions policy. This policy is developed against a review of the different ways in which the University could measure disadvantage and comes to the conclusion that 'race' remains the most reliable indicator for doing so. In March 2009 the University's Senate called for a review of the policy and appointed a task team to look into the issues. The specific mandate of the task team was to address the question of whether the University's current admission policy is effectively dealing with the legacy of racial discrimination and is assisting the University to build a diverse student profile. Central to the task team's work was the question of affirmative action and whether 'race' remained a legitimate proxy for determining and comprehending disadvantage.

In providing the context in which a debate could take place, the University expressed itself clearly on key issues. It accepted the position that apartheid had discriminated against black people on racial grounds and that their schooling, in particular, was marked by inferior provision. Their teachers were often less qualified than they would have been in more privileged white schools. Many students who

had the potential to study at university level were, as a consequence, denied the opportunity. Because of this race-based history, the University adopted the position that it was necessary to use race as an indicator to acknowledge, and so to redress, the disadvantaged and discriminatory experience of black students (Africans, coloureds and Indians).

At the same time, the University also acknowledged the significance of moving beyond the stigmatizing and reductive modalities of a 'race-based' approach to understanding disadvantage and the importance of becoming a non-racial and post-apartheid university. How could such a position, however, be developed without turning a blind-eye to the enduring legacies of racial discrimination? A matter of not inconsiderable significance in the midst of all of this was the question of the changing socio-economic environment and the reality that advantage and disadvantage were beginning to take expression in a wide range of forms. In this changing environment the central issue was whether race as an indicator did the job most effectively for determining disadvantage. Was it not the case, for example, that 'class' had become a more meaningful indicator of the disadvantage experienced by learners? For the University the question was both practical and one of principle. Practically, the University needed to have a clear and usable set of procedures to guide it in deciding, after academic merit had been considered, how its officers should administer its application procedures. Principally, it needed to be assured that the procedures it was adopting were just and fair. Were they sensitive to the complexities of disadvantage? Were they producing new forms of discrimination?

In answering these questions the task team consulted widely with stakeholder groupings inside and outside of the University and encountered a range of views on how the question of affirmative actions ought to be dealt with. The articles in this collection bring together some of the most crucial positions that have been taken in the debates that formed part of the consultation. As the reader will see, the issues are by no means straightforward, and there may be more agreement amongst the contending parties than is apparent at first glance.

In putting forward its recommendations, the task team grappled with the different positions taken in the debate. Contrary to opinion, it did not have a pre-determined view, for which it was simply seeking evidence. It avoided in the consultations leading the discussions in particular kinds of ways. In weighing up the matter it did, nonetheless, propose that the existing policy should be retained, namely that race should be retained as a marker of disadvantage in its admissions process.

It is important, however, to explain how the task team came to the decision to continue the use of race in admission procedures. It recognised that while it would not be desirable in the long term to retain the apartheid/racial classification categories as a University committed to non-racialism, in the immediate period substantial difficulties existed which made it difficult to have a policy in place which did not refer to race. These difficulties were two-fold:

1. The requirement of redress which policies such as the admissions policy have to address is conflated with the requirement to recognise disadvantage. In this process race, as in the current policy, is conflated with racism and is used to cover all kinds of disadvantage. The term race is used, as a result, as the indicator in terms of which redress and disadvantage are to be determined. The process for conceptually separating out the demands of redress from those of disadvantage is complex and cannot be easily and quickly managed. With respect to redress the complexity involves understanding and being able to locate the ongoing significance of the legacy of racism in learner performance, even in the lives of those who may be thought of as currently enjoying socio-economic advantage. In terms of the latter it is about understanding and identifying the particular nature of the disadvantage which learners may be experiencing. Bringing together a policy, which will acknowledge racism and the complex range of social and personal disadvantages, which an individual may be experiencing could be an ideal towards which a future admissions policy could aim, but is not immediately practicable. Most importantly, such a policy would need to assess how a redress factor might work and what kinds of information would have to be obtained to be able to identify and determine disadvantage. Neither of these two elements can be decided upon and elaborated quickly.
2. Putting in place an over-arching set of principles for consideration by the University, which could accommodate the lead time required for faculties to develop faculty specific admissions procedures by the end of the current academic year for use for the 2011 admission cycle was logistically impractical and required detailed additional work.

The articles offered here seek to illustrate the complexity that arose in the course of the work of the task team.